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AS OTHERS SEE US: A COMMENTARY ON THE OECD REVIEW OF THE QUALITY AND EQUITY OF SCHOOLING IN SCOTLAND

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ABSTRACT

The OECD's Review of the Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland provides a welcome opportunity to see the familiar in an unfamiliar light. It confirms that Scotland is a well-schooled nation, but it also identifies challenges, particularly with respect to social inequalities in achievement, the academic tradition of secondary education, the organisation of post-compulsory learning and the governance of Scottish education. The review is timely, and current developments (including Curriculum for Excellence, the reunification of education under a single Cabinet Secretary and the concordat with local authorities) provide opportunities to address these challenges. The review is intended to stimulate a debate within Scottish education; this commentary offers a research-based contribution to that debate.

OVERVIEW

In 2007 a team appointed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reviewed the *Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland* (OECD 2007)¹. The review had been requested by the previous Scottish administration which wanted to benchmark Scotland against international standards (Scottish Executive 2004). The review team was asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Scottish school education, with particular reference to pupils not achieving their full potential. It was also asked to comment on current reforms, in particular A Curriculum for Excellence, and to offer international insights from which Scotland might draw. The team visited Scotland for two weeks in March 2007, shortly before the May election and the formation of a new SNP government; it visited four local authorities and heard from a range of stakeholders. The review was also informed by a briefing document prepared by the Scottish Executive (2007), by international comparative data including the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), by Scottish data and by Scottish educational research, whose quality and impact were commended by the team's rapporteur when he presented the report to stakeholders in December 2007 (Teese 2007a).

An international report of this kind provides a rare opportunity 'to see ourselves as others see us', without the usual filters of domestic mythology and sectional interest. The report presents familiar features of Scottish education in a new and sometimes less comfortable light. For example, what Scots may see as a vigorous tradition of general education is perceived by the OECD panel as a narrow, conservative and socially exclusive ethos of schooling. What Scots see as a flexible curriculum and qualifications framework is seen by the panel to offer insufficient challenge to low achievers and to divert energies from the need for curricular and pedagogical innovation. What Scots see as a consensual, partnership-based model of governance, is seen by the review team to produce confused lines of responsibility, barriers to innovation and too little autonomy for local authorities and schools.

It is also useful to have perceived strengths confirmed by outside observers. The OECD team lists, among other things, the primary school, the community-based comprehensive school, school leadership and the professionalism of teaching staff as strengths of Scottish education.

An external review of this kind has limitations. Two weeks is a short time in which to get inside an education system, however rich the supporting documentary evidence. The review was organised through the Scottish Government, and inevitably reflects an 'official' frame of reference even when it offers constructive criticism. A review based on (for example) invited submissions from the research community might have seen things differently. And an international review is less able to place its findings in historical perspective. Most of the issues raised by the report are of long standing, and many have been the subject of earlier policy initiatives whose experience should inform new solutions. But the review team does not claim to have the last word. As the OECD's Director for Education notes in her preface, the report 'will become part of the public debate of education in Scotland. Its ultimate value will hinge on how well it nourishes that debate and how the Scottish Government interprets and applies its messages' (OECD 2007: 4). This commentary is offered as a contribution to that debate, nourished by the OECD report.

The report makes eighteen recommendations, grouped into five 'broadly-framed strategies':

National priorities funded through local government compacts: the government should agree outcome targets and funding with authorities on the basis of a national innovation plan. These agreements should be informed and monitored by the Scottish Survey of Achievement, which should be extended to cover all children rather than samples. Schools of Ambition funding should be targeted more exclusively on schools facing the greatest challenges.

Greater school autonomy in a local government framework: within the parameters of the national innovation plan, local authorities should develop their own policy frameworks and agree planned improvements in educational opportunities and outcomes with schools, which should be given greater management autonomy in curriculum and staffing.

A comprehensive, structured and accessible curriculum: this strategy encompasses nine of the eighteen recommendations. Each local authority, assisted by a network of schools, colleges and employers, should define and implement a 'charter of learning opportunities' suitable for its area. Vocational courses should be available for all students from S3, organised in sequences spanning the compulsory and post-compulsory stages, and delivered in schools where local authorities so propose. Standard Grades should be phased out. All 16 year-olds, whether at school or elsewhere, should embark on programmes or study plans aimed at achieving a new Graduation Certificate.

Continuous review of curriculum and teaching: authorities should aim for better student feedback on teaching quality, and there should be rolling consultations with teachers on issues of course design, pedagogy and learning outcomes.

Monitoring school-leaver destinations: the Scottish School Leavers Survey should be extended and enhanced; Careers Scotland destination data for schools should be enhanced.

My commentary is structured, not around these five strategies, but around the analysis which underpins them. I focus on six issues:

- the team's analysis of the strengths of Scottish school education;
- its analysis of the main weaknesses, and specifically of social inequalities in compulsory school outcomes and low participation and attainment in post-compulsory education and training;
- its explanation of inequalities and its analysis of the culture of secondary education;
- its discussion of governance issues and the system's capacity to innovate and to learn;
- its recommendations for vocational learning; and
- its proposed reforms of qualifications.

STRENGTHS

As the review notes, 'Scotland is a well-schooled nation by international standards' (p.27). It is a mature education system whose strengths include: its primary schools (and especially the early primary years), its community-based comprehensive secondary schools (and in particular their consistent quality across schools), its local authorities (although their performance is acknowledged to vary), the quality of school leadership (with specific reference to the Scottish Qualification for Headship), its teachers (with particular praise for the motivation and enthusiasm of new teachers), its culture of self-evaluation and improvement, and its strong performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) with relatively small proportions at the lowest levels of achievement. The international evidence shows that Scotland has a good school system, one which we would reasonably exchange with few other countries in the world.

This is an important conclusion. The OECD review is not a crisis account. The challenge is how to make a good system better, not how to replace a bad one. There are specific and important weaknesses to address, but reforms should preserve and build on the system's existing strengths. These are two tests by which any recommendations should be judged.

Some of us would add Scotland's colleges to the list of the system's strengths. The OECD team did not do so, because its remit focused 'principally' on school education, and colleges are mentioned primarily as co-providers of vocational courses for school students or as destinations of school leavers. However, as earlier policy reviews (notably the Howie Report) discovered, an analysis of schooling is incomplete if it excludes college courses for the same age group. Ideally a review of Scottish schooling, especially one with a specific remit to examine the Curriculum for Excellence reform of the 3-18 curriculum, would also have covered college provision at least for ages up to 18. That this did not happen is unfortunate, as we see below.

WEAKNESSES

The main weaknesses or challenges presented by the report are that an 'achievement gap' between children from different social backgrounds opens up around P5 and continues to widen in the compulsory years of secondary school; and that subsequent participation and attainment in post-compulsory education and training are low and unequally distributed across social backgrounds. In the words of the *TESS* headline, 'Poverty dulls success' (14.12.07).

There is plentiful evidence of social inequalities within compulsory education in Scotland, similar to those in the rest of the UK and in other OECD countries (Raffe 2006). However, readers might be confused by the apparent contradiction between the statement that Scotland 'has one of the most equitable school systems in the OECD' (p.14) and the later claim that 'the biggest challenge is to make its

comprehensive secondary schools work consistently well and equitably' (p.140). Readers familiar with research in this area might also question the team's assertion that significant achievement gaps only open up around P5. On the contrary: wide social inequalities exist before entry to primary school and in some cases they become even wider during the first primary years (Croxford, 1999). And international evidence attests to the importance of the early years for setting later patterns of inequality (Sinclair 2007). The SNP government, elected after the review team's visit to Scotland, has drawn on this evidence and identified early years education as a priority.

These potential confusions arise because the report refers to at least three distinct concepts of equity in respect of student achievement, but it does not always distinguish between them in its detailed discussion. I shall refer to these as

- o Equity 1: indicated by a narrow spread of achievement and/or by a very large proportion of students achieving at or above a minimum 'threshold' level,
- o Equity 2: indicated by a narrow achievement gap between students from multiply deprived or disadvantaged backgrounds and other students, and
- o Equity 3: indicated by a relatively shallow gradient of achievement across the whole spectrum of socio-economic status (SES).

The conclusion that Scotland's school system is equitable is based on Equity 1: fewer students score at the lowest levels in PISA assessments in Scotland than in most other OECD countries. However, the same assessments show that Scotland does less well with respect to Equity 3. The influence of socio-economic status on the 2003 PISA scores was about average for OECD countries. In the 2006 PISA results, not available to the review team, an indicator of economic, social and cultural status explained more variation in Scottish test scores than the OECD average (Scottish Government 2007).

In other words, conclusions about the equity of Scottish education depend on the concept of equity that is used. Compared with other OECD countries it does well on Equity 1 and poorly on Equity 3. It is harder to make international comparisons on the basis of Equity 2; the review presents data demonstrating the link between area deprivation and under-achievement, but it also stresses that the problem is social inequality across the whole spectrum of SES and not simply a problem of poverty and deprivation. Unfortunately, the review team's diagnosis that achievement gaps open up around P5 is based exclusively on an analysis of Equity 1. It is based, moreover, on 5-14 curriculum levels that are of doubtful suitability for this type of analysis. The team presents no evidence that social inequalities in achievement (based on Equity 2 or 3) only open up around P5. But these inequalities, not Equity 1, are the problem which Scotland needs to address. The team thus offers an incomplete analysis of the achievement gap, which leads it to the mistaken conclusion that social inequalities are primarily a phenomenon of late primary and (especially) secondary education, and that that is where the main solutions must lie.

The conclusion that Scotland performs better in terms of Equity 1 than Equity 3 has another implication which remains largely implicit in the report. Recent policies have focused on the 'lowest attaining 20%' without specifically addressing the association between low attainment and socio-economic conditions. It may have been implicitly assumed that a policy which targets the lowest attaining 20% automatically addresses social inequalities, but the evidence produced by the review suggests that this is not the case. Policies need to address the social distribution of attainment, and not just its overall dispersion.

The second main weakness identified by the review team is partly a consequence of the first. Despite rising attainment in compulsory education, too many young

people leave education at 16 or 17 years, and participation levels have remained flat since 2000. The only growth has been in the college sector, which the team suggests is a mixed blessing, since it enables schools to 'export' the challenge of diversity to colleges (p.115). Among those who stay on attainment has been low. Participation and attainment are both strongly correlated with social class. These problems are in turn linked to unemployment and to one of the highest proportions in any OECD country of 15-19 year-olds not in education, employment or training (the NEET or 'more choices, more chances' group as they are now officially termed).

The review's argument is well made. Participation and attainment have indeed been low and unequally distributed, with little growth in recent years. Social inequalities in participation and achievement in Scottish education have tended to widen after the age of 16 (Raffe *et al.* 2006). Labour-market conditions provide part of the explanation for unemployment and NEET in the more depressed areas of Scotland, but they are not the whole story. Comparatively speaking there is not a lack of jobs: Scotland has one of the highest rates of youth employment in Europe (Scottish Executive 2006). The post-16 problem in Scotland is largely one of low participation in post-compulsory education and training and the low attainment that results.

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND THE CULTURE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

The review team is clear where the sources of inequity in Scottish education do not lie. They are not primarily due to the level or distribution of resources. Nor are they primarily due to school differences. Most inequalities in Scottish education are within schools rather than between schools: 'Who you are in Scotland is far more important than the school you attend, so far as achievement differences on international tests are concerned' (p.15). The team's argument is consistent with research evidence that secondary schools are less socially segregated than in most other OECD countries, and that the effect on attainment of attending one school rather than another is small (Jenkins *et al.* 2008; Croxford & Paterson, 2006; Croxford 2000).

Instead, the team attributes social inequality to the impact of common features of schools' organisation, curriculum, culture and pedagogy, which offer unequal opportunities for learning and engagement for students from different backgrounds. This view lies at the heart of the OECD report. A uniform curriculum can be socially discriminating. The 'academic' ethos of Scottish schools is unequal in its impact on learners, and offers too few incentives to learn, either intrinsic or extrinsic, for young people from socially disadvantaged homes. It privileges middle-class students at the expense of working-class students and especially those from backgrounds of poverty or social disadvantage. The curriculum is similarly blamed for low participation and attainment in post-compulsory learning: it lacks 'transition effectiveness and pedagogical inclusiveness' (pp.113-114).

The team recommends that the curriculum and ethos of Scottish secondary schools should be made broader and more diverse. It thus challenges the academic, intellectualist tradition in Scottish education (Paterson 2000) which - it perceives - still dominates the ethos of secondary schools. But it does more than this. For the academic tradition of Scottish education is also a democratic one. Struggles for equality in Scottish education have been struggles for access to the mainstream academic curriculum, not struggles to impose alternative curricular models as in some other countries (Paterson 2003). Concepts of 'alternative route' have had little resonance in Scotland because the mainstream has been perceived to provide access for all who merit it (Anderson 1995). Scotland largely avoided the curricular radicalism which engaged egalitarian reformers in England and elsewhere. So when the review suggests that the traditional academic curriculum, rather than

being the prize of egalitarian reform, is actually the main barrier to equality, it is posing a direct challenge to the Scottish democratic tradition or to a large strand within it. However, its recommendations are consistent with a re-interpretation of this tradition, associated formerly with Higher Still and more recently with Curriculum for Excellence, which stresses the need for greater diversity within the mainstream. The emphasis of recent reforms has been, not to impose uniformity, but to stimulate diversity within a unified framework that prevents socially divided pathways or tracks from emerging (Raffe *et al.* 2007).

The review is 'impressed by the breadth of vision and commitment to both high standards and social inclusiveness in the concept documents of a Curriculum for Excellence' (p.16). It commends its aspiration to diversify and broaden the methods, contexts and outcomes of learning. And at a time when Curriculum for Excellence is trying to win the hearts and minds of Scottish educators, especially in secondary schools, this support will be welcomed. However, the Curriculum Review Group which proposed Curriculum for Excellence saw curricular, pedagogical and organisational changes in schools as means to achieve the broader purposes of education, to pursue national goals, to meet global challenges and to exploit new opportunities in the educational process itself (CRG 2004). It did not see them primarily as means to address social inequalities. The OECD team, by contrast, argues for such changes almost solely on the grounds that they will reduce social inequalities.

And this is where its argument is weaker. The review team appears to see curricular reform, especially in secondary schools, as the magic bullet which will abolish social inequalities. This may be unrealistic, for at least three reasons.

First, as we have seen, inequalities take root long before young people enter secondary school and are exposed to its curriculum.

Second, the international evidence suggests that no magic bullet exists. Social inequalities in education are complex, deep-rooted and have multiple causes (HMIE 2006; Raffe *et al.* 2007). The review's analysis rests on a 'cultural capital' interpretation, which focuses on the interaction between school and family cultures (the rapporteur, Richard Teese, is a leading exponent of the work of Pierre Bourdieu). It pays less attention to other possible sources of inequality, such as poverty and the material circumstances of the home, or to other types of explanation such as psychological and developmental explanations which focus on such issues as parenting styles, family composition and family relationships, physical and mental health and the development of self-esteem and resilience. (Such explanations often focus on the years before P5.) And it interprets cultural capital in a more optimistic spirit than researchers who have used the concept to explain why inequalities are so difficult to eradicate.

Third, and most important, the team provides little evidence that curricular reforms in other countries have solved the problem of inequality. It refers approvingly to vocational education in Australian schools as a source of diversity, but the rapporteur's own research on Australian education, and that of his colleagues, draws attention to the low place of vocational studies in a socially stratified curriculum and to its marginal, 'bolt-on' status in school cultures (Teese 2007b; Polesel 2007). There is some evidence from other countries that a broader approach to curriculum and pedagogy can engage low-attaining learners (although success is far from guaranteed) and that systems which incorporate diversity have positive effects on participation and attainment (Steedman & Stoney 2004; Leney 2004). In other words, curricular reform might influence Equity 1, the spread of attainment. The effects on Equity 2 and Equity 3 are less certain; another strand of research suggests that vocational learning (which the OECD team identifies with a broader curriculum) can provide a 'safety net' for the socially disadvantaged, but also a 'diversion' from higher education (Shavit & Müller 2000).

To summarise, the review team criticises the narrow academic ethos of Scottish secondary education and advocates greater curricular, pedagogical and cultural diversity. It offers a welcome insight into how ‘others see us’, and specifically how they see the secondary curriculum. However, the team weakens its case by exaggerating the likely contribution of such reforms to equity, and by overlooking other more cogent arguments for curricular reform.

GOVERNANCE AND INNOVATION

If the narrow and homogenous ethos of Scottish schools provides one recurring theme of the review, problems of governance and the barriers to innovation provide another. This theme underpins a majority of the eighteen recommendations. It has three main strands.

First, the team argues that responsibilities for the curriculum are unclear. When the team presented its findings to Scottish stakeholders the rapporteur posed the questions: ‘Who is responsible for the curriculum in Scotland? When it doesn’t work, who is responsible?’ (Teese 2007a: 9) He also commented on the perceived slow progress of Curriculum for Excellence. The review criticises the compartmentalised approach to curriculum development, in particular the separation of vocational education from mainstream Curriculum for Excellence developments. As a result, the development of vocational courses is insufficiently informed by the Curriculum for Excellence principles, and mainstream 3-18 curriculum development fails to benefit from the pedagogical, organisational and professional experience of vocational learning initiatives. The integration of student learning across general and vocational courses is neglected: ‘Will it be possible to bridge the academic and vocational divide if developmental work proceeds independently?’ (p130)

Second, the team argues that local authorities and schools need more power, especially over issues which are essential for innovation such as staffing and the curriculum. The team’s argument is complex: it acknowledges differences of view over the current extent of school autonomy, and it recognises a need for clear national priorities within which devolved powers should operate. It recommends greater devolution of power within a stronger accountability framework, with a clearer focus on outcomes and with closer monitoring of performance at pupil, school and authority level. This includes, among other things, extending the Scottish Survey of Achievement to all pupils as a basis for negotiating resource and outcome agreements with local authorities and for monitoring improvements.

Third, the team argues that Scottish education is itself a poor learning system: ‘there is only limited knowledge of “what works” [in tackling deprivation], and successful experience is not being harvested, even if it is circulated through professional development and inspection.... Schools should be funded to innovate and to produce durable change. Moreover, this should be part of a national learning effort in which experience is tested and builds into knowledge on which all schools can draw....’ (p.145) The proposed enhanced performance monitoring and accountability would be part of this ‘national learning effort’; the team also recommends improved arrangements for student feedback, rolling consultations with teachers over the design and delivery of the curriculum, an enhanced Scottish School Leavers Survey and more detailed destination data fed back to schools.

These comments illustrate how international observers can present the familiar in an unfamiliar light. The Scottish style of policy-making, which seeks progress through consensus, partnership and tacit agreement rather than formal regulation (exemplified in a curriculum that is *de facto* compulsory but not a national curriculum), is seen by many Scots as a virtue. It appears to the OECD panel as a muddle in which responsibilities are unclear, concepts are confused and rigorous evidence and analysis are shunned in the name of consensus. Of

course, many Scots have also been critical of this style. Some have questioned the true extent of partnership and consensus (Humes 2003). Others have complained of unclear responsibilities, as when the More Choices More Chances working group noted that ‘no-one really owns NEET’ (Scottish Executive 2006: 39). Ken Spours and I have argued that policy-making and policy learning in Scotland resemble a collaborative model (Raffe & Spours 2007). This model ensures that the experiences of practitioners, learners and stakeholders contribute to policy debates, and that policy development is informed by implementation. But it also tends to mistake consensus for evidence, and it underestimates the very unequal influence of different partners or parties to the consensus. Many of the team’s recommendations aim to introduce more rigorous standards of evidence into the innovation system, and to empower those whose voices are insufficiently heard. These are worthy aims.

The team recommends that more powers be devolved to schools and local authorities within the context of national innovation plans which define priorities and set targets for student opportunities and outcomes. This recommendation chimes with the recent concordat between local authorities and the Scottish Government, which gives authorities more power over their own budget in return for broad agreements about outcomes. It also resonates with the engagement strategy of Curriculum for Excellence which aims to share ownership of the reform with schools and authorities (CRPB 2006; Priestley 2005). However, it raises three issues:

First, are all local authorities, and all schools, equal to the task? As the review team notes (p.37), the performance of authorities has been variable, and some are too small to have a strong strategic capacity. A scheme for devolving powers to local authorities should be compatible with the kind of collaborative multi-authority arrangements which are supporting the roll-out of Curriculum for Excellence.

Second, how can a model which prioritises school-based innovation protect the existing strengths of Scottish comprehensive education, including the low social segregation of schools and the consistency of school standards? The logic of the OECD team’s argument, which emphasises the different social contexts of areas and schools, could encourage schools to diversify to match their social environments, thus leading to a more stratified system of middle- and working-class schools. And the team’s recommendation that Schools of Ambition funding be restricted to ‘the most challenged schools’ (p.144) is misconceived: it would stigmatise the schools concerned and it would encourage a view of innovation as a response to (and admission of) failure. The issues surrounding the interaction of schools and their local contexts are complex and there is no simple solution (Lupton & Thrupp 2007); but an English-style move towards specialisation and diversity at the school level would almost certainly increase inequality (Taylor *et al.* 2005). Moreover, pupils who move between schools need continuity of learning; and parents, colleges, universities, employers and other stakeholders need a transparent system which they can understand. A ‘national’ curriculum, whatever its formal status, is an asset to preserve, and a devolved innovation system should encourage diversity within schools rather than between schools.

These two issues will face Curriculum for Excellence whether or not the review’s recommendations are accepted. The third issue is more specific to these recommendations. The proposed performance management regime, based on an expansion of testing, would discourage curricular diversity, breadth and depth of study, pedagogical variety and (above all) a culture of innovation (Arnot & Menter 2007; Cowie *et al.* 2007). The team’s presentation to Scottish stakeholders highlighted the need to instil confidence and a willingness to innovate (Teese 2007a); but people do not innovate or take risks if they expect to be judged by measures based on traditional values and criteria, and existing measures do not

adequately cover the range of curriculum outcomes which the review team, and Curriculum for Excellence, both advocate. A strong regime of tests and targets could signal the end of Curriculum for Excellence and the culture of innovation on which it depends. Ironically, the team recognises these same ill-effects when it discusses Standard Grades and premature assessment for qualifications.

Finally, the review team is right to criticise the fragmented governance of curricular reform, especially the separation of vocational education from mainstream developments. The Curriculum for Excellence programme started with the 3-15 curriculum. This was for understandable reasons, but it has had three unfortunate consequences.

- It has led to Curriculum for Excellence being perceived as a ‘mark 2’ version of the 5-14 programme. An alternative approach would have started with the question which frames the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education in England and Wales: ‘What is an educated 19-year-old in this day and age?’ (Hayward *et al.* 2006: 15)
- It ignores the principle of downward incrementalism: that in an education system marked by successive decision or branching points the later stages influence those before them (Gray *et al.* 1983).
- It has resulted in vocational learning, and the reform of qualifications, staying partly separate from the main reform process.

These issues are discussed in the next two sections.

VOCATIONAL LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

The OECD team makes three sets of recommendations for vocational learning in schools:

- It recommends that vocational courses for school-age pupils (such as Skills for Work) should have a broader emphasis than employability skills, and they should be designed for learners of all abilities and backgrounds. In effect they should be seen as part of a much broader agenda of curricular, pedagogical and cultural diversity.
- It recommends that vocational learning should be delivered as sequences or programmes of learning, which start in compulsory schooling and follow through to post-compulsory stages. It mentions upper-secondary vocational programmes in Norway and Finland as examples.
- It favours vocational provision based in schools rather than colleges: the North Lanarkshire model. The recommendation is cautiously worded – the Scottish Government should support such provision ‘where local authorities seek to implement’ it (p.150) – but the team sees school-based vocational provision as an important means of promoting the cultural broadening that it hopes to see in schools. ‘Can the academic and vocational divide be effectively bridged if schools “farm out” Skills for Work courses to colleges?’ (p.131)

The first of these recommendations would be supported by most Scottish educators. The rhetoric of Skills for Work courses stresses their broad aims and their suitability for learners of all aptitudes and abilities. The recommendation risks being ignored on the grounds that ‘we are doing it already’; the review panel does not think that we are.

The second recommendation may conflict with the first, despite the fact that they are expressed as a single recommendation in the report. A vocational sequence or line which spanned compulsory and post-compulsory education would almost certainly acquire a strong employment focus (if it did not, it would struggle to gain credibility among learners and other stakeholders). Indeed, the OECD team itself advocates ‘rethinking curriculum in terms of economic incentives and economic

impact for all young people' (p.114) - a process which is likely to reinforce an emphasis on employment. The Norwegian and Finnish vocational programmes which are cited as examples do not span compulsory and post-compulsory education; they are discrete upper-secondary programmes. International experience suggests that prolonged vertical pathways through vocational education rarely work in practice; learners tend to move 'diagonally' from general to vocational learning or from vocational learning to employment. The report's analysis conflates two concepts and discourses of vocational learning: *pre-vocational learning*, which has broad educational outcomes and is for all learners, and a narrower concept of *occupational learning* which assumes a commitment, however provisional, to the occupational area of study. Pre-vocational learning is appropriate in (but need not be confined to) compulsory education, and it is a suitable instrument for encouraging greater cultural diversity in schools. As the team itself argues, occupational learning is not appropriate for compulsory education, where it would run the serious risk of introducing 'tracking' and increasing social inequalities.

The team is right to argue that we should critically examine the pathways that lead from compulsory education in Scotland. However, its specific recommendations for vocational pathways are based on an incomplete analysis of the system. It is incorrect when it says that '[u]nlike in countries such as Norway, Sweden, France or Australia, vocational courses [in Scotland] do not form sequences or programmes of study'. Scottish colleges offer numerous vocational programmes of this kind, many of which are being formalised as National Certificates, and many of which combine with Higher National and other awards to form sequences. In addition there are Modern Apprenticeships and other programmes delivered (at least partly) in workplaces. These programmes, not Skills for Work courses, provide the appropriate comparison with upper-secondary programmes in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and elsewhere. Whether these Scottish programmes match up to their foreign comparators is another question: indeed, it is precisely the question that the review should have been asked to address. But it was not; post-school provision was not part of its remit, presumably reflecting the separation of policy-making for school and post-school education before the May 2007 election. This was unfortunate. It meant that the review did not address key questions such as

- Are existing vocational pathways adequately signposted and transparent?
- Do they connect adequately with destinations in the labour market as well as higher education, and do they provide sufficient incentives for young people at all attainment levels to participate? How do they compare in these respects with equivalent programmes in other countries?
- Are work-based programmes sufficiently integrated with other post-16 provision?
- Most importantly, should college courses taken by 16-18 year-olds be treated as part of upper-secondary education, and fully incorporated within such developments as Curriculum for Excellence, or should they be seen as part of a flexible framework for lifelong learning after school? Can they be both?

Because of this narrow remit, Scotland missed an opportunity for informed external scrutiny of a crucial area of its education system.

QUALIFICATIONS REFORM

Over the past twenty-five years Scotland has developed a 'climbing-frame' model of curriculum and qualifications, based on small units of study which allow flexible entry and exit points and flexible opportunities for vertical, lateral and diagonal progression (Raffe *et al.* 2005; 2007). The climbing frame, exemplified by Higher Still, caters for students at different levels of prior attainment by offering a choice of levels at which to enter the frame, rather than by offering alternative tracks with

different curricular content or pedagogical approaches. The review criticises this model, partly on the grounds that it has had only partial success in catering for lower achievers, and partly because it is a distraction from ‘the real solution to low achievement [which] is not to relax demands and lower expectations, but to exert pressure and secure engagement through more pedagogically effective and incentive-based curricula’ (p.44). The review team characterises the climbing-frame approach to student differences as *vertical differentiation*, which it associates with ‘hierarchical and examination-led demands in courses of a largely traditional kind’ (p.124). It favours instead a model based on ‘breadth of content and approach’, which it describes as *lateral differentiation*. It recommends the phasing out of Standard Grades, which offer ‘summative finality’ rather than the springboard for further learning that is desired at this stage (p.136). And it advocates a Graduation Certificate with ‘defined minimum requirements to reflect the purposes of the new 3-18 curriculum, but also substantial flexibility as to content, level and duration of studies to ensure accessibility’ (p.152). All 16 year-olds, whether in school or elsewhere, would enter programmes or negotiate individual learning plans leading to the Certificate.

These recommendations are premised on the current 2+2+2 phasing of secondary schooling. They need to be adapted to the proposed 3+3 phasing of Curriculum for Excellence, in which the new levels 3 and 4 would be covered in S1-S3 followed by a new senior phase from S4-S6. Thus, the main issue is not whether to abolish Standard Grades, which could simply lead to their replacement by the more flexible Intermediates, but whether and how to restrict certificated courses to the senior phase. The review team’s critique of Standard Grades provides a strong argument for postponing entry to all certificated courses to S4 or later. And in place of the premature but summative finality of Standard Grade, all certificated courses taken up to the age of 18 could contribute to the proposed Graduation Certificate.

How should these courses and qualifications be structured? The Review team’s approval for lateral rather than vertical differentiation sits oddly beside its rapporteur’s own analyses of Australian (Victorian) schooling, where lateral and vertical differentiation are seen as two different but equally powerful sources of social inequality (Teese 2000; 2007b). If lateral differentiation is part of the problem in Australia, how can it be part of the solution in Scotland? Moreover, the Review’s analysis overlooks the extent to which previous Scottish reforms, especially Higher Still, have tried to address issues of vertical and lateral differentiation. It refers approvingly to Australian states where ‘academic and vocational subjects are nested within a single certificate’ (p.128): but this is exactly what Higher Still’s unified system set out to do. It did so by separating vertical from lateral differentiation. In tracked systems vertical and lateral differentiation are conflated: weaker students are diverted into vocational or applied tracks which are nominally at the same level but in practice less demanding and lower status than the academic track. In such systems differentiation that is nominally lateral is actually vertical. Higher Still enabled the content of learning to be distinguished from its level by placing all types of learning within the same framework of levels. As a result, less-qualified students can continue in general education at a level suited to their current attainments, while stronger students can enter vocational studies at a level and status congruent with their abilities. Higher Still was introduced precisely to remedy the defects of a system based on lateral differentiation, whose main curriculum components, Highers and modules, embodied contrasting principles of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. It would be perverse to restore such a system now.

However, the review confirms that in practice Higher Still replaced this system with one that was more uniform and ‘academic’ than its original vision of diversity within a unified framework. Higher Still did not lead to a substantial broadening

of the upper-secondary curriculum and it did not achieve parity of esteem for different types of learning. There were several reasons for this. One reason was that academic interests had priority in its development and implementation; as the OECD review points out, Curriculum for Excellence risks making the same mistake if it marginalises vocational learning. A second reason was that schools implementing Higher Still gave priority to academic subjects and higher levels of study, and (as argued by the OECD review) sometimes used its climbing frame to reduce expectations rather than to develop alternative pedagogies and curricula with weaker students. A third reason was that Higher Still maintained and reinforced Scotland's distinctively open and flexible structure of upper-secondary education. Almost uniquely within the OECD, Scotland has no concept of upper-secondary completion or graduation, and it makes no prescriptions for the content, level or duration of study. In such a system the curriculum is shaped by the demands of 'end-users' which (often unintentionally) tend to reinforce academic values and hierarchies.

This history carries clear lessons for Curriculum for Excellence. And the OECD review asks a further question, if not in so many words: are the curricular and cultural changes which Curriculum for Excellence seeks to achieve compatible with the climbing-frame model of curriculum and qualifications? Curriculum for Excellence promotes breadth and depth of study, a diversity of content and pedagogy, a holistic approach to learning and the space for schools to innovate and experiment. All these things may be harder to achieve in a curriculum which is fragmented, which encourages premature and frequent certification and which has no defined end-point. But the climbing frame also has strengths, as noted above. It is flexible. By separating vertical and lateral differentiation it provides a potential basis for a diverse but coherent curriculum, and for parity of esteem between types of learning. And because the climbing frame connects with post-school qualifications through the SCQF it supports progression.

The team's most interesting recommendation, for a unified but flexible Graduation Certificate, might just provide an answer to these dilemmas. A Graduation Certificate based on existing National Qualifications, and other qualifications in the SCQF, would preserve the flexibility of the current system. But it could have several additional advantages. It could give meaning to the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence, and underpin its breadth, depth and diversity without formalising inequality. It could reduce pressures for fragmentation. It could provide for a more even balance of power between end-users and school authorities. It could limit the distorting effects of assessment and certification, by ensuring that hard-to-measure outcomes and experiences were nevertheless included in the curriculum. It could simplify and clarify pathways and their inter-connections. It could provide incentives for young people to stay in education, or for those already staying on to aim for a higher level of study. Above all, it could underpin a coherent, cohort-wide approach to 15-18 learning, embracing schools, colleges and training providers, while preserving links with employment and further learning. It could provide a practical solution to the question (raised earlier) of whether college provision for 16-18s should look down to the school system or upwards to other lifelong learning provision after school; a unified Graduation Certificate, built on the SCQF climbing frame, would allow it to do both.

A Graduation Certificate would not be an easy solution. An essential condition for success is that the Certificate should have currency in *its own right* – as more than the sum of its parts. Its specification would need to be sufficiently flexible to provide access, and to prevent the Certificate from becoming an instrument of exclusion, but not so flexible that it lost all meaning and credibility. It should be designed from the start as a unified Certificate: the more specific Baccalaureates

proposed by the current administration could probably not serve as prototypes. Scotland has an unhappy recent history of group awards in schools, and elsewhere in the UK over-arching certificates have been considered on several occasions and rejected—with the sole exception of the Welsh Baccalaureate which is being piloted and implemented, albeit amidst controversy. The lessons of this history would need to be learned. They might lead us to conclude that a Graduation Certificate could not work in Scotland, or that it could work only under unacceptable conditions. But if it succeeded, it could help to solve the problems of the most intractable stage of Scottish education, and the idea deserves further consideration.

CONCLUSION

The OECD review confirms that Scotland is a well-schooled nation, and it identifies several strengths of its education system. But it also identifies challenges, and its impact will depend on the capacity of Scottish education to recognise and respond to these challenges.

The first challenge relates to the ‘achievement gap’ between young people of different socio-economic backgrounds. This problem is shared by all OECD countries, but the inequalities in Scottish education are wider than in many of our high-performing comparator countries. The review exaggerates the link between social inequalities and the secondary curriculum, and underestimates their origins in the early years. But it demonstrates that the problem is the social distribution of attainment rather than simply low attainment per se; and the problem has not been adequately addressed by measures targeted on the lowest-attaining 20 per cent.

The second challenge is to the academic tradition of Scottish secondary education. This challenge is timely: the momentum for curricular reform is still much weaker in secondary schools than in early years or primary. In this context it is significant that experts from contrasting European and Australasian traditions agree that the curriculum and culture of Scottish secondary education are unacceptably narrow. Their analysis suggests that we should re-define the Scottish democratic tradition which has pursued equality by broadening access to the academic mainstream. This mainstream now needs to incorporate curricular and pedagogical diversity if it is really to be inclusive. The review challenges Curriculum for Excellence to reaffirm its inclusive vision and to sharpen its efforts to achieve it.

The third challenge is to the organisation of post-compulsory learning. Scotland badly needs an internationally-informed review which covers all post-compulsory provision. Unfortunately the team’s remit was drawn too narrowly to provide this. But it identifies problems of low participation and attainment beyond 16, and it draws attention to issues concerning the clarity and transparency of pathways, the role of institutional sectors and the coordination of provision. This challenge, too, is timely. With school and post-school learning under the same Cabinet Secretary, a more coordinated approach to post-compulsory learning is now possible. This approach should start with the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence. The strategy for this phase needs to be spelt out as a matter of urgency, and it should cover all learning by 15-18s, in school and elsewhere. The review team’s proposal for a unified Graduation Certificate, while by no means easy to design or implement, might provide a way forward and deserves to be considered seriously.

A final challenge, and the most uncomfortable to many, is to the governance of Scottish education. The review commends the vision of Curriculum for Excellence but it criticises the way that this vision is being implemented, especially the fragmentation of responsibilities and the separation of vocational learning from other developments. The review challenges the complacent self-image of Scottish policy-making and its concepts of partnership and consensus. Most importantly, it questions the system’s capacity for learning and effective innovation. Some of its recommendations reflect an uncritical belief in the New Public Management,

but its analysis of the current situation is timely. The concordat between the government and local authorities provides an opportunity to improve governance and to promote the ‘national learning effort’ proposed by the review.

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NOTES

1. The team comprised Richard Teese (Australia, rapporteur), Simo Juva (Finland), Frances Kelly (New Zealand) and Dirk Van Damme (Belgium). It was supported by Gregory Wurzburg, Karin Zimmer, Deborah Fernandez and Sabrina Leonarduzzi of the OECD Secretariat.

2. This analysis is somewhat confused by the indicator chosen to represent area deprivation: the local authority’s share of the 20% most deprived zones in Scotland (p.75). Since Scottish local authorities vary hugely in size this indicator reflects the size of the authority as much as, or more than, its level of deprivation. This may account for the emphasis in the report on social deprivation as a specifically urban issue.

3. The Netherlands is the classic example of this pattern, despite recent attempts to re-establish ‘vertical’ transition paths (de Bruijn & Voncken, 1998; Nijhof and van Esch, 2004). As education systems become more flexible and unified, with more opportunities for horizontal and diagonal transfer, it becomes more difficult to create and sustain prolonged vocational pathways.

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